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## The implications of translation

*"Blessed are the women whose strength is in you,  
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.  
As they pass through the Valley of Weeping,  
they make it a place of springs;  
the autumn rains also cover it with blessings,  
They go from strength to strength,  
Till each appears before God in Zion."*

PSALM 84: 5–7 (Personal Paraphrase)

I thought I had a bright idea for the planning committee of our church's first women's retreat. "Let's not try to find a name for this. Let's just put these verses on the front of the brochure."

One young woman's face shone with joy. "Does it really say that?" Tracy demanded.

"No, it doesn't *say* that, but it *means* that," I replied cavalierly. The light of her countenance went out. Just for a moment she thought I'd found a psalm addressed specifically to women.

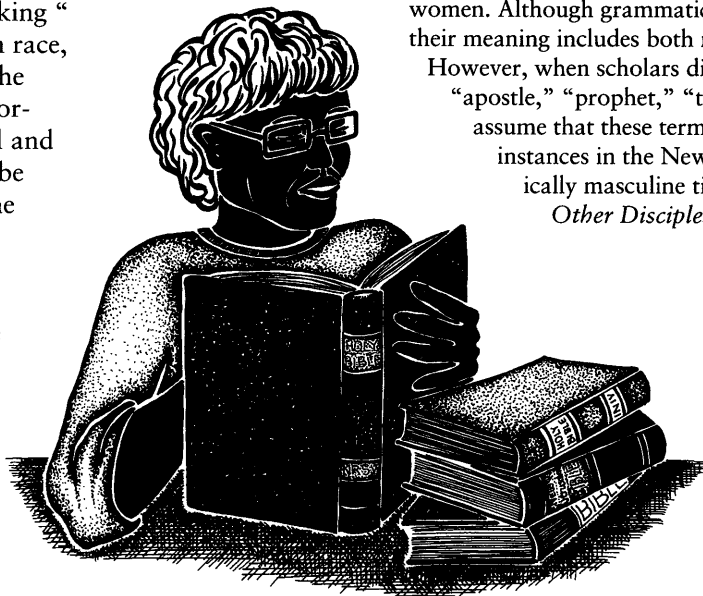
Her reaction woke me up. I had always dismissed the issues around gender-exclusive translations of the Bible, thinking "I know I'm part of the human race, part of *mankind*. What's all the fuss about?" But if Tracy, a former model who was beautiful and talented, longed so visibly to be included in the language of the Bible, I would have to think again. If it mattered to Tracy, how much more important would it be to a battered wife or a sexually abused teen, or simply a woman without Tracy's confidence?

My thinking was spurred when we moved to another church, where the *New International Version* (NIV, 1978) was the pulpit Bible. I sat in the pew with my *Jerusalem Bible* (1966). It was certainly not designed to be an inclusive language translation, but it is scholarly, and I noticed over and over again that where the NIV translated the New Testament Greek as "men" the older translation often said "people." Where the NIV said "brothers," my Bible sometimes said, "brothers and sisters." When we were studying James, it happened almost twenty times! I was forced to realize that the evangelically-approved NIV obscured the role of women in the New Testament church. It was more sexist than the earlier Roman Catholic translation.

I don't read New Testament Greek, but reading articles about translations, it became clear to me that many translations have a gender problem. The African women who worked on the Umtata Women's Theology Bible Study Series express it this way:

In both New Testament Greek and English, certain words (such as "the saints," "the elect," "brothers," and "sons") are masculine, whereas, in fact, they include both men and women. Although grammatically they are masculine words, their meaning includes both male and female church members. However, when scholars discuss leadership titles (such as "apostle," "prophet," "teacher," and "deacon"), they assume that these terms apply only to men despite clear instances in the New Testament where such grammatically masculine titles applied to women also. (*The Other Disciples of Jesus*, p. 28)

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to the truth that frees."**

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As the years passed, our household welcomed a small library of Bibles that would have made Tracy feel more included in the proclamations of the Good News (see annotated bibliography following this article).

In this issue of *Women's Concerns Report*, several writers speak of their discovery of gender-accurate "inclusive language" translations. Mary Massey has recounted her experience with the *New Revised Standard* (NRSV, 1989) translation, where there has been an attempt to stay closer, in modern English, to the meaning of the originals. Unfortunately, her experience also demonstrates one pastor's hostility to a translation that is more honest about women's visible presence in the early Church. Alex Bartel has written, from the viewpoint of a liberated male, about his personal epiphany on the same subject and his church's adoption of the NRSV as its pew Bible.

Not all of our writers are concerned with gender-accuracy. Some are interested in the power of the Scriptures in different languages. Sylvia Klauser has written movingly about J.B. Toews, on his deathbed, taking comfort from the Good News as he first heard it in German. Katharina Rempel describes the importance of different language translations in her quest for the truth that would free her from cultural restrictions. Maribel Ramirez has gone in the other direction and is now using a Spanish translation for her Sunday School classes, to validate the cultural heritage of home for her Mexican students. Sue Harrison, among the privileged women who can read the Scriptures in all their original richness, shares that joy with us.

I believe that the Holy Spirit can work through all the translations to lead the reader to the truth that frees, so it was a great joy to read about the diversity of experience of these writers. I trust that other readers will be affirmed, stretched, and blessed as they read.

—compiled by Donna Stewert

**Donna Stewart chairs the Women's Concerns Committee in British Columbia, Canada. She has been delighted to give gender-accurate translations to some of her thirteen grandchildren.**

## **A Selection of Articles and tapes on translation issues**

Evans, Mary. "Inclusive Language and the NRSV," in *Study Bible for Women*, pp. 1–3

"Interpreting the New Testament," p. 8–11. op cit.

Fee, Gordon. Questions on Gender-Accurate Bible Translation.

Tape of a lecture given for Christians for Biblical Equality at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada, 1998.

Fee, one of the translators of the INIV, gives a lucid, passionate explanation, with examples, of the reasons the Bible has to be re-translated from the originals from time to time: scholarship develops more knowledge about the meaning of words and the cultural contexts in which they were used; effective evangelism requires it; pastoral concern demands it. Available from Regent College, bookstore@regent-college.edu or at 1-800-334-3279 or 5800 University Blvd., Vancouver, Canada V6T 2E4

Hull, Gretchen. "A High View of Scripture: Good News for Women," in *Study Bible for Women*, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Mary Evans, Elaine Storkey (Eds.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995, pp. 4–7.

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## My favorite gender-accurate Bibles

*Please note that these are not paraphrases. Free-flowing modern language versions like The Good News Bible and Eugene Petersen's The Message have been very helpful to some people, but the writers put contemporary accessibility before literal accuracy.*

*New International Version (Revised) (INIV).* Hodder and Stoughton, 1996

My version of this Bible proclaims a "Money back Guarantee." Though it was labeled "stealth Bible," and "feminist tract" by some frightened souls, its translators were committed to accuracy, beauty of language, clarity of words and meaning, and dignity of expression. If readers are not satisfied with this translation, Hodder and Stoughton have promised that they (male and female, presumably) can return the book for a full refund. To May, 2000, the publisher reports, "not a single person or bookshop took us up on this offer!" When the promised less-rushed American revision appears, it will be even more exact, apparently.

*New Jerusalem Bible,* 1989

Approved by the Roman Catholic Church, even more gender-accurate than the 1966 version.

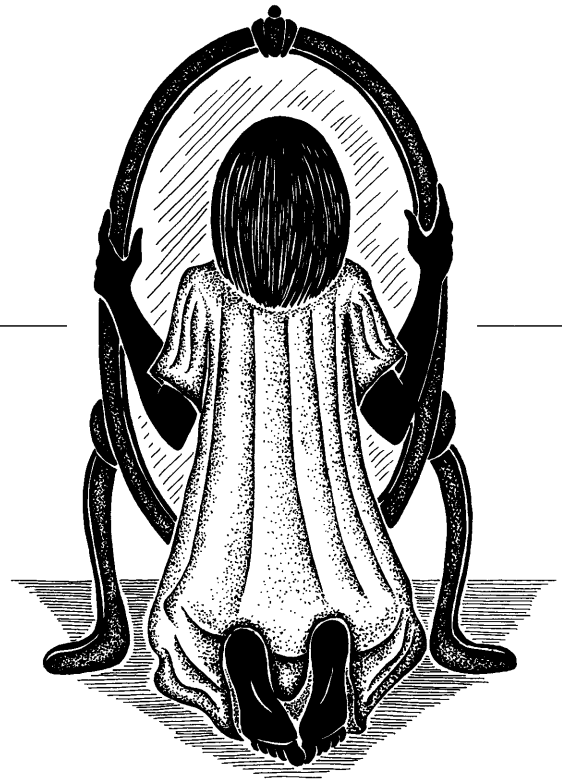
*New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV),* 1989

Regarded as the best of the inclusive language translations by some authorities, but I like the Psalms better in the INIV.

*Study Bible for Women: The New Testament.*

Commentary and notes by Catherine Clark Kroeger, Mary Evans, Elaine Storkey (Eds.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995.

Not to be confused with an NIV Devotional Bible for women, this one, based on the NRSV, includes notes by mostly women scholars to women readers and others. The pastor in my house says every pastor should read the introductory article on the need for inclusive language translations (see page 2).



by Mary Massey

## *Imago dei:* The importance of the New Revised Standard Version

A few years ago I was asked to read a passage from James at a friend's wedding. During the rehearsal the officiating pastor, a male, asked from what translation I would be reading. I responded by saying, "The *New Revised Standard Version*." The pastor reacted in a strong voice saying, "That translation is unbiblical! Its inclusion of women is clearly not what the biblical authors intended. It has been tainted by the agenda of people who are politically correct. I want you to use the *American Standard Version*."

Why is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) of the Bible controversial? Why are people so offended by it? To answer these questions I ask myself why this translation has so much meaning for me. Why is it so important to me that my students and my church use this translation? The NRSV translation allows me to see myself in the text. It allows me to see myself as a reflection of the image of God. This translation is the most accurate at showing that women are a part of the *imago dei* (Latin for image of God).

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Alvin C. Dueck, a former professor of pastoral counseling at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS), was a key person in my life who helped me understand why it is so important for an individual to recognize the image of God inside of herself/himself. He taught that where you can see God in yourself, there is life, and what spiritual formation does is to recognize that life and nurture it. Psychological aliveness reflects God's image and that echos through our whole being. There is empowerment in recognizing the *imago dei* in yourself. It promotes physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being while also bringing you closer to God.

While I was attending seminary at MBBS, the issues involved with using the NRSV translation came up a number of times. The predominantly male class often asked questions like "Why can't women see the word male and just recognize that it means male and female?" and "Why is it such a big deal?" I respond to that by remembering the freedom that I felt the first time I picked up the NRSV. It is not that women can not intellectually make that switch but it was freeing not to have to do all of that switching in my head. When I now read other translations I get a feeling that is almost claustrophobic. I wonder if others around me notice that I am being left out and I constantly find myself asking "What about me?" With the NRSV I do not have to ask the text "What about me?" anymore. I am already there, a part of the story, and there is no question that I am a part.

There are still many members of Mennonite churches who do not think that women are included in the text. The issue is not that including women is redundant. Part of the controversy behind the NRSV is that it includes women at all. It is scary to me to think that some people do not think that women are included in the text. This is detrimental to individuals, churches, and societies. By allowing inclusive pronouns in places they were not before, we are telling women that they belong in this text, that they were and are a part of this story. Saying that gives both a liberating and a comforting feeling. It also does not allow men or women to not make that mental switch in their heads to include women. It forces readers to recognize that the text is also speaking to and about women.

There is a theological tradition that says that God speaks to men and then men speak to women. This leaves women with no direct access to God. It also says that men reflect God's image and women do not. John, a fellow student in seminary, was a firm believer in this tradition. He often said in class that if men treated women the way God intended, then including women in the Biblical language would not even be an issue because they would be treated as God would treat them. I think that he totally missed the mark in understanding the issue. Even if there was no oppression and women did not need to be liberated, this would still be a problem. Just as men need direct access to God, so do women. Just as men need to see the parts of them that are reflected in the image of God, so do women. For me, the NRSV responds to this theological tradition and says that it is wrong.

The Bible is steeped in a cultural tradition where patriarchy ruled. Women and men need to be educated about ancient culture in order to understand, for example, why Mary, the mother of Jesus, says so little in the gospels, and why it is so difficult to find women in the text. We must be told that the steps Jesus took in including women were revolutionary at the time, although it may not seem such a big deal to us today. The *New Revised Standard Version* takes a step in eradicating some of the questions so that they are no longer even questions. I pray that a younger generation of women will not have to ask if they are included, or have to make that mental switch in their heads, because the translation of the Bible they have been reading their whole life already includes them.

"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27)." The NRSV tells both women and men that all are a part of the image of God. I am grateful for this translation because there have been too many times in my life when men and women have told me to see God's image in the men around me instead of in myself. The *imago dei* goes deep into how we understand who we are, and I believe that understanding that you are a part of that image is central to what it means to be a Christian.

**Mary Massey lives in Fresno, California where she is the Youth Director at Clovis College Community Church Mennonite Brethren. She is adjunct faculty at Fresno Pacific University.**

**"I realized that the issue of inclusive language had very little to do with some women's negative experience with fathers and everything to do with the gospel being proclaimed for all people."**

by Alex Bartel

## A Gospel for all people

I have always considered myself a fairly understanding and accepting person. Twenty three years of medical practice have brought me into contact with many different people and situations. In general I have felt that I have responded to these people without significant bias, and as much as possible, accepted their language, culture, religion, or personal persuasion. As I write this article, many names, faces and situations come to mind that have broadened my experiences. Hopefully, as I learned from patients, I have in some way helped them along the way. When my patient C. was dying of AIDS, the fact that he was homosexual was not an issue for me in the care that I provided to him. I hope that my attitude toward my aboriginal patient on her own native spiritual pilgrimage is supportive. Although a number of my patients know my personal views on abortion, they know that they will find personal support whatever decision they make.

During most of these years my view of God and my way of addressing God, both in my personal and public life, was in the traditional male gender. As much as I thought my attitude toward my patients was broad and inclusive, my "God language" was not inclusive. During these years I attended a Mennonite church in which the issue of inclusive language never really came up and was never discussed. I was aware that some people preferred not to address God in the masculine gender and I somewhat naively assumed that this was due in a large part to the fact that many women had negative "father" relationships and therefore prefer

a more neutral reference to God. I just left it at that and gave the whole issue very little further thought.

A variety of factors, inclusive language not being one of them, contributed to my family transferring our church membership to Langley Mennonite Fellowship about two years ago. I still vividly recall the Sunday morning conversation with a church member that resulted in my realization that my thinking had been somewhat narrow and naive. I realized that the issue of inclusive language had very little to do with some women's negative experiences with fathers and everything to do with the gospel being proclaimed for all people. I, who had considered myself as relatively accepting of others, had really not been proclaiming a gospel that was inclusive and freeing to all men and women. I became acutely aware of every male reference to God in scripture, songs, and prayers. It was as if I had made a unique new discovery. I realized, however, that in a congregation that had been relatively supportive of the use of inclusive language, there were still many references to God in the male gender. I know that there are some situations where it may be more difficult or cumbersome to change wordings and expressions, but I found that there were many situations where it would not be difficult to reword a hymn, prayer or reading. We could do more. I recently became a member of the worship committee and found that, although there was support for

the use of inclusive language, it was not formulated in the goals and objectives of the committee. We have now articulated this in our goals. We have also purchased additional NRSV Bibles for church and worship leader use. This translation is the most sensitive, of current translations, to the use of inclusive language.

In my medical practice I have had many opportunities to talk to patients about spiritual issues. Sometimes it is an encouragement to explore the spiritual component of their



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lives and sometimes it is a discussion of past negative experiences of a patient's personal and family life. I have often told patients that if the message of Jesus is not a freeing and liberating experience then they have missed Jesus' central message. Jesus came to set us all free. This message does not fit with a language that leaves women on the periphery. Not only should my life and actions, but also my language, reflect my beliefs and views of God. My language has to change. My theology requires it. God is a God for all people.

Response to my new realization was varied. Some, of course, supported me but some people rejected the idea, and others implied that it was an old issue and wondered where I had been. That last response left me mute since I did not want to further expose my uninformed self. I decided to try to say less but do more to change my language. However, those that know me or my family might say that it is hard to keep a "Bartel" quiet. Now I find myself writing publicly to encourage the use of more inclusive language.

This is not a women's issue, it is a matter of presenting a freeing, liberating gospel that is for all people. God is much greater than all personal pronouns. No words in our vocabulary adequately describe God. We must avoid using words that further limit our view and understanding of God. It is important to me that I, and the church that I attend, communicate the freeing and liberating message of God in a language that includes all people rather than using words that portray a gender bias that is not in keeping with the God in whom I believe.

**Alex has lived in Chilliwack for 22 years, where he and his wife Martha have raised 4 children. He is involved in a busy family practice and also does some hospital administration. Hobbies, when he finds the time, include driving his horse and carriage, boating and RVing. He is a member of Langley Mennonite Fellowship.**

  
by Sylvia Klauser

## **When language becomes personal**

Professor Hans Kasdorf looked at us, his class in non-Western Theologies at MBBS. We could not have been a more diverse group of students, representing the Ukraine, Russia, Germany, Japan, Brazil, and maybe one or two North Americans. Instead of beginning to lecture, he asked us when, in our opinion, we thought we had a good handle on English. The answers were as diverse as the group. We agreed that there are three significant signs showing that one has been "thoroughly" immersed in a new language. The first sign is when people actually laugh about the joke you told in your second language. The second sign is that you don't sweat blood anymore when being asked to pray (in public that is) in a second language. And the last one happened to me one morning after I woke up. I could still remember the dream, was even thinking about it on my way to seminary—but what was so different about it? Suddenly it hit me, I had dreamed in English for the first time. After this experience I felt much more comfortable with my second language even though today there are still times when I ask in a conversation, "uhm, what's the word I'm looking for?"

Eight years of public school English in Germany and one year of Intensive English Language class at a nearby Nazarene Bible school were a thin and brittle foundation on which I tried to build when first arriving in Fresno, CA for graduate studies. But nothing was as nerve wrecking and horrifying as the first sermon I was supposed to preach. Not that preaching was new to me; no, preaching in English was new. In addition, I had to read the script for reasons of clarity, choice of words, and all paralyzing (including brain activity) nervousness. Now, being a person who likes to make a joke or a slightly sarcastic remark—even in a sermon (just to bring home a point of course), reading a script was very difficult. Eventually I got used to reading my sermons, but I'm still not quite convinced that everybody always understood the points

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I was trying to make. Nonetheless, after a couple of "sermon trial runs" the church asked me to become their associate pastor on a half time basis. It was at Izi's Armenian Deli, across the street from the seminary, where I was asked to consider the position, and I almost choked on the Armenian coffee. "You must be kidding, right?" was my first response, followed by about 10 reasons why I was the wrong person for the job. Most prominent among them, I never wanted to be a pastor! But, as my maternal grandmother used to say, "you always get what you don't want" (even though the content of conversations ending with this statement was usually related to men). I became what I never wanted to be, a pastor.

In retrospect, being native German in an English speaking congregation was the best thing that could have happened to me. Especially the older and old population in the congregation liked it very much to practice their German on me. I particularly cherish the moments when J.B. Toews and I had discussions about theology on which we did not agree. Various styles of worship or preaching did not agree with him, and when he was particularly upset with what he had heard, he would let me know in no uncertain terms, and usually in German terms, what needed to be improved. Having been his personal assistant for a year before I became his pastor, we had shared trips to the doctor's office, the grocery store, the library, or back

and forth to church, and we were comfortably switching languages often mid-sentence. Later in his life, at the time when he became sicker and considerably weaker, he used German much more often. It seemed as if he was going back to the language he had spoken first as a child. He was delighted hearing me read his favorite scriptures from my German Bible, so much so that he often "helped" by joining in by quoting from memory or finishing the reading for me. In the end, when speaking was a huge effort for him, short answers came almost only in German. This might be due to the fact that I was addressing him in German, but it seemed to me that English was harder to understand for him at that point.

Maybe researchers and language experts are right when they say that at the end of our lives we go back to the language we spoke first as a child. I know J.B. did. And as many languages we learn, as many academic pursuits we follow, in the end we will always go back to songs, psalms and scripture our mothers taught us when we were little. I will never forget the moments when J.B. and I cited Psalm 23 together or when we prayed the Lord's Prayer in German, the language we both loved and grew up speaking as little children.

**Sylvia Klauser is currently a Ph.D. student in Scotland, working on Anabaptist Medical Ethics.**



**"There was a growing ambivalence in my soul about God's character and who I was in relationship to God. Yet there was also an intuitive knowledge that God did truly love me and was inviting me into relationship."**

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by Katharina Froese-Rempel

## Female and created in God's image

"How can God say he loves us all the same and then order half of us to be less important just because we are female?"

I can still feel the tension that filled the silence in the room after I asked this question in catechism class. Writing about it now, my body still remembers the ambivalence that filled me as I dared to ask the question that challenged "the way it has always been;" my heart was beating faster, my wrists ached, my face was flushed, and my stomach was in knots. I knew instinctively that this was the wrong question, but I had to ask it regardless. I couldn't keep silent any longer.

I grew up in Northern Mexico (Chihuahua State) in a Mennonite Colony. We lived in a village surrounded by families that still adhered to a dress code and sent their children to the village school. My parents sent my three brothers and me to a Mennonite private school near the city. At home we spoke Low German (Plattdeutsch). At school we learned Spanish and High German. In church the worship services and Sunday school classes were offered in High German. As a result I had two bibles, the German Luther Bible and a Spanish Bible. Both translations used the standard male pronouns for God and people.

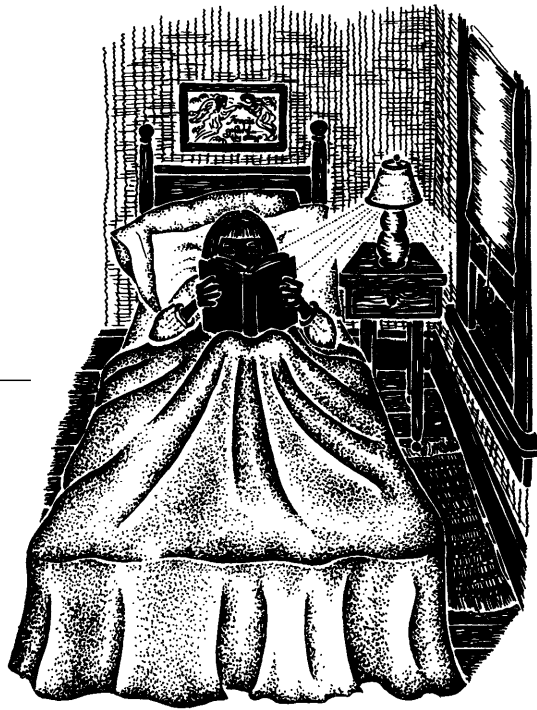
I was still very young when I became aware of very definite differences between the genders. I experienced it at home as I observed that my brothers had more opportunities and received more privileges than I did. When I questioned this and resisted this experience, I discovered a different set of rules that applied to me because I was a girl, I was told I was special because I was a girl, but I felt "less than" when I observed my brothers receiving privileges purely because they were male. I was "other than" in a way that clearly told me that being a girl was less desirable.

At school the same scenario played itself out. The boys got away with so much more; they were offered more opportunities, their ideas mattered, their opinions were respected, and their contributions valued more. Boys usually were the leaders, the achievers, the class presidents, and valedictorians. There seemed to be incongruence in word and behavior that caused me to think long and hard about the order of things. Repeatedly this "order" was defended during devotionals at home. Bible classes at school and Sunday school and worship services at church supported Scripture claiming it to be God-ordained and blessed.

Inside I felt growing resistance to this order and a deep sense of injustice. I began to resent being a girl. I vowed I would not follow the tradition that expected I would marry, be a wife and have children as my main purpose in life. I escaped into reading and studying. After long hours of farmwork, I would sink into bed at night, close the door, and read into the early hours of the morning. I read biographies of women who dared to live outside the expected order of things. I admired their courage and longed for their freedom. I read fiction stories in which girls were heroes as well. I read my Bible hoping to find a way that would allow me to be important too, a verse that would offer me equal privilege. I attended church and listened carefully to the sermons and Sunday school lessons. But I could not find what I was looking for. At church and school I heard many Bible stories and sermons that usually highlighted the males in the stories.

The stories of Esther, Ruth, Deborah, Huldah, Mary (the mother of Jesus) and Priscilla were some that drew me to search deeper. There was something in the stories of these women (among many others) that seemed to point to God's inclusion of them on an equal basis with males. It seemed obvious to me; clearly God was calling these women and included them in the work of redemption to at least the same degree as the males in the stories. Yet that is not how the stories were presented. The males in these stories were usually highlighted until there was





hardly anything left of the female's participation. In the few stories in which the characters were primarily female, their importance was diminished by the subtle reminders that women must ultimately submit. The message seemed to be that God's work was completed despite the circumstances that necessitated female leadership contrary to the "more natural male leadership." If women had to say something in the church, they couldn't use the pulpit; they had to use a microphone away from the pulpit. Female Sunday school teachers taught the children's classes only. Males exclusively taught all youth and adult classes. References to humanity were mainly through male pronouns. The messages about God's character were exclusively male.

I felt confused, troubled, and deeply hurt. Intuitive questions formed in my soul and rose slowly into consciousness. I analyzed what I heard around me and searched the Scriptures for an alternative. I wondered what Joel 2:28 and Galatians 3:28 meant for me. Did God have a message for me? Was I truly invited equally with my brothers, or was I allowing my "sinful" desire to be valued equally get the best of me? The message I received from adults in my life, both male and female, served to keep me quiet. My inquiries were met with shock or disdain. In either case I was encouraged to "just let things be," that these issues were obviously beyond my ability to understand. I felt agony when reading passages like Ephesians 5:22 or Timothy 2:11-15. How could my Creator and a loving God do this to me? Where was the answer? I couldn't find it. Instead I found myself excluded more and more; I didn't fit anywhere.

I noticed God was referred to only with male pronouns. I knew I was supposed to consider myself included in the references to "mankind" and "brothers" but it felt unfair. There was a growing ambivalence in my soul about God's character and who I was in relationship to God. Yet there was also an intuitive knowledge that God did truly love me and was inviting me into relationship. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well, the adulteress brought before Jesus for judgement, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, and the many other references to women

following and serving Jesus kept me going. These stories weren't only about these individual women. To me they represented the marginalization of so many women, of so many members of humanity. In Jesus' interaction with them, there seemed to be glimpses of how redemption and restoration might look, that they could mean so much more than

we were daring to realize. In my enthusiasm I attempted to share this with a few individuals but was grossly misunderstood. I withdrew into myself, pondering my thoughts while also attempting to shove them underground. If only I could make myself fit the expected order, then perhaps all would be well. I could never do this very long, then my doubts and longings would drive me back into further searching again. I longed for God's love and compassion but couldn't access it. I felt intense longing for a God who valued me, a growing and developing female, who loved me as a person and invited me, too. But I found little relief. Anger and feelings of injustice were in the way. I couldn't accept that God would condemn me to a secondary existence only because I was female. I did not want to love or be loved by a God like that.

Then came that fateful morning in my catechism class. For weeks we had been studying the character of God and the relevance of those truths in our lives. There was that burning question again that I had held in my heart for years but had not dared to speak out loud. That morning, when the pastor paused for questions, I couldn't contain it any more and so it came tumbling down from my lips. The silence was heavy. The pastor stared at me in disbelief. Ashamed and suddenly feeling very vulnerable, I lowered my gaze and fixed my eyes on the floor. I vaguely remember the standard answer about men and women having different roles and functions, that men are called to be spiritual leaders, and women are called to submit to this God ordained order. And of course the inevitable conclusion, this order is here due to the fall but God's love is the same for us all. The condemnation I heard in my head was so loud it drowned out what else was said in class that morning.

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**"As I read the Bible in a new language (English) I read these stories again with a new interest. I began to notice the women anew and God's invitation to them. I particularly noticed Jesus' inclusion of them and respect for them."**

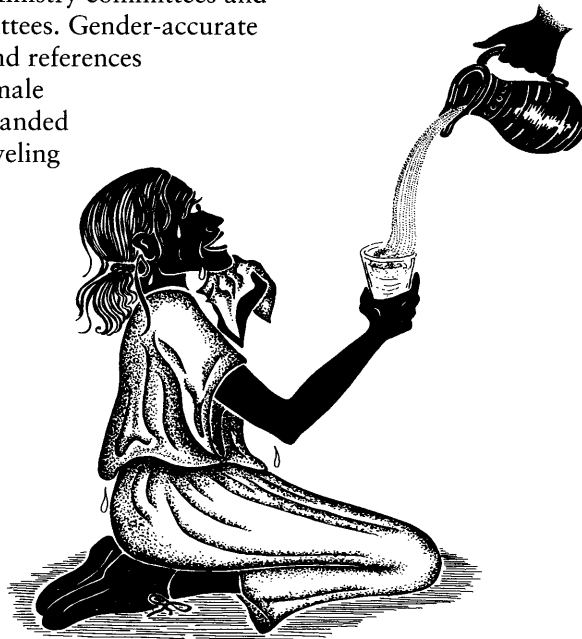
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I wanted to run from the room, disappear and hide but felt so immobilized that I couldn't move. I remained in that frozen position until class ended. When I was left alone and dared to move, my eyes were burning with unshed tears of shame and contempt for myself. My chest felt restricted as I struggled for air. In that moment I knew that there had to be another way and that I would not give up until I found it. I was baptized later that spring and then I left Mexico in order to study in Canada.

In Bible College I took on independent studies that would help me explore these issues further. I learned about different Bible translations, hermeneutics in interpreting Scriptures, feminist theology, and stories of women in the Bible that I had read so many times without truly seeing them. I had teachers, mentors and friends that invited me to see what had been there all along but I hadn't fully seen. As I read the Bible in a new language (English), I read these stories again with a new interest. I began to notice the women anew and God's invitation to them. I particularly noticed Jesus' inclusion of them and respect for them. I also learned about new perspectives on the creation story, the fall, God's work of redemption and the full invitation of women to participate in all arenas.

I began to attend some conferences around these issues sponsored by the Women in Ministry committees and the Women's Concerns committees. Gender-accurate Bible translations were used and references to God were balanced with female images. I felt as if I had been handed a cool drink of water after traveling a very long and hot road that had left me tired and thirsty. I remember the deep feeling of

relief and sorrow I felt simultaneously during the first conference I attended. It seemed I had finally arrived home after a very long despairing journey. I also felt deep sorrow that it had taken so long. I felt grief and loss but didn't know clearly why and for whom. On some level I felt it for myself and yet I also felt as if I were mourning for my friends and family, for all women who were suffering as I had. Inside of me there grew a knowledge that these issues were much larger than my own experience. I was silent in the car as I drove home alone from this first conference. I was reflecting on my experience and trying to come to terms with what I had seen and heard. Suddenly a loud and shouting cry rose up from deep inside of me so powerful I couldn't contain it. I pulled over by the side of the road and wept violently. It was as if years of tears and torment were released. I gave words to the doubts, the anger and the despair that had filled my soul. In the days and months that followed I wrote volumes in my journal, and I met with other women and continued to process what was happening to me. Through them I felt God's invitation on a very personal level; I was seen and heard as a person of value and dignity. In the process of expressing my doubts, my questions, and my fears out loud, I was able to face much of what had tormented me for years. By hearing me they were honoring my experience which empowered me to continue on in my own journey. They became an experience of God in flesh to me.



Eventually I got my own gender-accurate language translation of the Bible. I read the Scriptures and experienced myself included in so many references to "people" rather than "men" only, "brothers and sisters" rather than just "brothers." As I continued to study and explore these changes, I felt that a wound that had been raw and open for so long was beginning to heal. God was mothering me and gently tending to my spirit. With compassion and warmth God continued to invite me to be, female and created

**"While I don't dismiss the difficulty of learning the original biblical languages to the seminary student, they are absolutely essential for those who would be leaders in a church we identify as biblical."**

in her image. As I read my gender-accurate Bible I felt a growing sense of redemption that could heal the male/female rift inviting us into mutuality and equality. The passages in Joel 2:28, Galatians 3:28 and Jeremiah 29:11 became sources of ongoing strength and joy. Many people, independent of each other, gave me these passages to reflect on and to encourage me along the way. That served as an affirmation that I accepted as coming from God. I wasn't alone on this journey anymore—God and God's people were there with me too. Of course, this journey was not easy either. There were times of doubt and fear that I might be led astray. I struggled through nights without sleep, filled with anxiety as I was caught between the old and the new. I knew I could not go back and yet felt unsure about embracing the new. I went through days feeling a sense of panic and wondering if I was allowing myself to be deceived by my desires of who I wanted God to be. I wondered if perhaps some friends and family were right when they challenged me and expressed their concern that I was backsliding and moving away from the true God. But I couldn't deny what was happening inside me in spite of it all. I continued to read and search my Bible, discovering a consistency that pointed me into the direction of grace: God's redemption and invitation equally available for all. A transformation took place inside of me that affected my whole existence. It challenged my contempt for self, it changed the way I relate to my partner and our families, and it impacted how I relate with my friends and in my work relationships. I felt free, the truth had set me free to love God and myself. The journey continues; I am continuously learning and discovering more about God and the ongoing work of redemption even today. God does love me and has created me equal. I am a woman and God delights in me. She blesses all my sisters, brothers and me.

**Katharina Froese-Rempel lives in Abbotsford with her partner Henry. They are expecting their first child. She works as a therapist with clients who have experienced abuse, primarily women and children. She likes to read, go to movies, visit with friends, walk and hike. She is a member of the BCMCC Womens Concerns committee.**

by Susan Kennel Harrison

## Learning from the original biblical languages

My entry into the world of biblical languages began at the Institute of Holy Land Studies in Jerusalem (now called Jerusalem University College). I enrolled in biblical Hebrew because it seemed like a good thing to do when studying the Bible in Israel! Ironically, I doubt I ever contemplated before that moment the fact that the Bible was not written in English. I was aware of various English translations but never knew that to be the product of Christians over the ages attempting to put Scriptures which came to us in a foreign language, into the vernacular. I vaguely remembered heated conversations between Christians in my home community regarding why or why not the NIV was to be preferred to the RSV or the *King James Version*. I remembered a labored lecture at Goshen College by Stanley Shenk about the value of Bible study done by the RSV translators and wondered what the big deal was about. Nowhere in those exposures to the fact that differing translations bothered people and were problems to be resolved and defended did I notice that it was a conversation around translation(s)—meaning somewhere there was an original. How funny, I think now. I enrolled next at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries where I studied as much of the languages as I could because it seemed like an obvious next step for a person who had a biblical faith. I am so grateful someone had the foresight to see those as important aspects of a good seminary education, and make them a part of the mandatory curriculum. While I don't dismiss the difficulty of learning the original biblical languages to the seminary student, they are absolutely essential for those who would be leaders in a church we identify as biblical. Why do I think this? Many reasons; academic and personal.

One of the joys of learning another language is discovering the unpredictable nuances in the meaning of words. Anyone who has had to function overseas in another language for a given period of time knows the reality of coming home and desperately wanting to utilize a word from

#### MCC staff to know

There are several MCC staff, in different locations throughout the United States and Canada, working at Women's Concerns or related issues.

**Eleanor Epp-Stobbe—**  
Voices for Non-Violence

**Eileen Klassen Hamm—**  
MCC Saskatchewan Women's Concerns

**Elsie Wiebe—MCC British**  
Columbia Peace/Domestic  
Violence Sexual Abuse Network

**Kathryn Mitchell Loewen—**  
MCC Canada Women's  
Concerns Network  
Coordinator

**Beth Graybill—MCC U.S.**  
Women's Concerns Director

**Debra Gingerich—MCC U.S.**  
Women's Concerns Report  
Editor

their newly acquired foreign vocabulary, because it somehow communicates, on the level of one's inner core, a meaning that just can't be found in the English language.

The more time I spend reading the Bible in Hebrew and Greek the more the biblical story begins to take on nuances and depth that are so hard to translate into English. I feel so blessed to have another kind of vocabulary to name for myself a meaning I have come to have for a particular text. Let me illustrate:

For many of us the passage in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses what are appropriate worship behaviors for men and women, where the impetus for head coverings emerged in the Swiss Mennonite tradition and where the patriarchal order has been seen to have been authored as such by God, has given us much to sort out in our relationship to one another in the church. In light of the move away from coverings, we might wonder what is it about 1 Corinthians 11:10 specifically that has lent itself to re-interpretation?

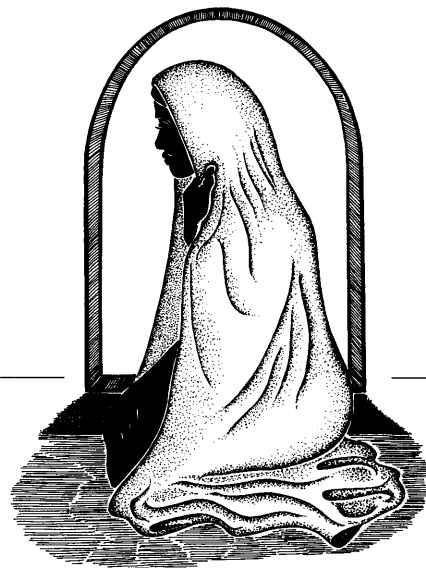
Is it simply an external North American feminist insistence that a patriarchal reading of 1 Corinthians 11:10 is no longer permissible? Might I suggest that the possibility for redefining the meaning of verse 10 comes from within the text itself?

I say this because the Greek word used here has been the source of much interpretation which has found its way into our various English versions of the Bible. This is because of the difficult word, *exousia*, usually translated as "a sign of authority" (NIV) or "a symbol of authority" (NRSV). One of the benefits of reading this text in Greek is that one has the opportunity to be alerted to what are called "variant readings." These are found when all the Greek manuscripts we have to date were compiled and it was noted wherever there is a word that is not unanimously the same from manuscript to manuscript. In regards to verse 10, the Greek text has a small notation mark that alerts the reader to look at the notation on the bottom of the page and notice that not all manuscripts used the word, *exousia*. A couple manuscripts have a different word in its place. That word is *kalumma*, specifically meaning "a veil." This second word choice is far from being a majority opinion, but it brings to our attention that already in the earliest history of the church scribes and church fathers were wrestling with how to

understand this passage. Some sought to make it easier for their parishioners to understand by "fixing" the word choice to be more clear about what they thought it should mean.<sup>1</sup> In this particular case some manuscripts that were in the early Egyptian Christian communities, as well as in Irenaeus, and Epiphanius felt it would be helpful to the flocks they shepherded in the faith to change the confusing word *exousia* to the word for veil.

Well, wouldn't Paul have written "veil" had he meant that in the first place? This is always the question, and the process of answering it is rather involved, but a very cursory answer would be that he didn't mean veil. Paul was writing about something utterly different in 1 Corinthians 10 than prayer coverings. Well how can that be? we ask ourselves, it's always been understood as a veil with which a pious Christian woman would cover herself. What else could Paul possibly be saying? This then is where the fun of exploring the Bible through the lens of its own language can begin."<sup>2</sup> Good exegesis requires that we read lots of verses before and after the passage we want to better understand. In this case I am drawn to start my reading at 1 Corinthians 10:23 where I learn that "everything is permissible," but not everything is beneficial. By starting here, (ideally we should start back in chapter eight), we begin to notice that the larger context in which Paul's comment about this mysterious word, *exousia*, exists, is actually part of a series of teachings about what it means to affirm Christian freedom (10:25–27, 29b–30) while practicing consideration for others (vv24, 28–29a) and giving glory to God (v. 31).<sup>3</sup> Sure, you say to me, now you're going to talk about the freedom we have to "submit," but actually I don't think that's what Paul ever intended.<sup>4</sup>

Paul is pretty clear about how he believes the new life in Christ creates a new kind of community where persons' spiritual experiences are considered equally valid "in Christ." It seems the Corinthians really got into the spirit of this new androgynous-like living and had so passionately shed their traditional roles and overturned the typical social norms for religious etiquette around prayer and worship that Paul felt compelled to provide some instruction of "how to do ritual life" as new believers. This trou-



bling word, *exousia*, has the connotation in English of “having power over,” but the subject is more likely to be the woman herself, rather than men, which has been the traditional interpretation. Paul wants the woman to exercise her own power to take appropriate action for her piety and propriety in worship. Everything is permissible, even worshipping and praying without your head covered, but as it was the custom to be covered for right worship, Paul wants the Corinthian women to understand that for the good of the community, they should have the ability to make the choice of appropriate propriety in worship (which in their case meant proper dress and demeanor).<sup>5</sup>

Is it that Paul had it out for women? I don’t think so, because in verse five he doesn’t stop women from prophesying, he just wants them to do it according to the acceptable rules for ritual worship. In verse 11 he consoles all those freedom-possessed believers, men and women alike, with a reminder of their interdependence within the community. He wants them to be a community “in Christ” that knows a radical break from social norms of the day, but “within reason” is the nuance I think Paul wants to communicate to this creative and impassioned group. And, after he’s had his say, he cuts the subject off by saying in verse 16, nobody else needs to practice their freedom “in Christ” this way, so you don’t need to either!

The importance of being able to read the Bible in its original languages and interpreting the text for myself became very apparent while I pastored a small congregation in the Illinois Mennonite Conference/Central District Conference. This experience raised my awareness of how we, as a biblical church, are becoming more and more reliant on what is called “secondary literature” to inform our opinions of how to interpret the Bible. This can get particularly messy when various congregations form interpretational opinions which they bring to conference-wide meetings and try to impose on others. I was alarmed by what appeared to me as non-discriminating choices of secondary scholarly authors

and popular Christian writers to form opinions that are consequently becoming the polity of our churches and conferences. As a Mennonite I have always had some sense of suspicion of how other Christian traditions use the Bible, and now as a feminist I am increasingly suspicious of how the Bible is being used within my own tradition. I cannot imagine that we can call ourselves Mennonites, a priesthood of all believers, and a biblically based church while more and more relying on the so-called experts of other Christian traditions to inform us of how to read and interpret the Bible. I am equally alarmed when we as a denomination attempt to form biblically based theology and church polity based on reading the Bible in English translation. Languages, including English translations of the Bible, do not exist in abstract forms, they reflect sociological and cultural world views. For me to read the Bible in its original languages has become an issue of faith. If I want to learn from God’s people who went before me and knew firsthand God’s revelation(s), then I can most honor that relationship by trying to hear it in their own words. I believe that the community of faith can learn to hear such culturally informed nuances, through women like me, and not just the experts. I thank God for the blessing of opportunities for education to learn to read of God’s revelation in the languages in which it was recorded and to see how language choices show how communities in Christian history have sought to understand the Bible. The biblical languages let us into the hearts of those who sought to know God and to share that knowledge with others. While revealing the perspective in life from which they lived, it is none the less awesome to be able to enter the spiritual world of those who have gone before us. What a Creator we have who reveals in so many varied ways, “. . . the divine reality [that] makes itself humanly comprehensible through the structures of language.” (Michael Fishbane)

continued on page 14

• **Women's Concerns Report** has a new editor. **Debra Gingerich** began as editor on August 14. She comes to this position with seven years experience with Mennonite Central Committee, including nearly three years assisting Women's Concerns as a part of MCC U.S. Peace and Justice Ministries. She is presently studying for a Master of Fine Arts in Writing and is newly married as of September 9.

• On April 14, 2000, **Eleanor Epp-Stobbe** successfully defended her doctoral dissertation. It is entitled, "Practicing God's Hospitality: The Contribution of Letty M. Russell Toward an Understanding of the Mission of the Church" and is available through Emmanuel College in Toronto, Ontario.

## Notes

1. For more information about Scribes "fixing" texts see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*.
2. I am indebted to Dorcas Gordon, Knox College at Toronto School of Theology, who brought to my awareness a new way of reading 1 Corinthians 11 which did not require me to dismiss it as irrelevant to our North American church context, but rather as relevant as ever!
3. The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books. *New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1991: 240–241.
4. I Timothy is a good illustration of a community that practiced "Pauline Christianity" with an emphasis on maintaining the status quo when it came to social/gender norms. Thanks to Prof. Leif Vaage for teaching me to compare the different ways Paul and Pauline Christianity relate to the social norms as they worked out what it meant to be "in Christ" while yet "in the world."
5. Dr. L. Ann Jervis writes that Paul is concerned here with how the Corinthians are interpreting Paul's preaching on "liberty in Christ and its consequent reprehensible practice on the basis of their Jewish-Hellenistic approach to Paul's earlier teaching on the unity of man and woman in Christ." The Corinthians thought that their spiritual image was one that had transcended gender. "Accordingly, Jervis writes, they believed that customary gender-specific hairdressing and apparel no longer expressed their new life. . . ." Thus in the worship in the Spirit "they disregarded the related cultural norms." Paul wants them to move away from their "disgraceful behavior" and to tell them that being male and female in Christ "does not obliterate the diversity of the sexes, but rather establishes it in all of its glory—and believers should not disguise this." L. Ann Jervis, "But I want you to Know. . . : Paul's Midrashic Intertextual Response to the Corinthian Worshipers" (1 Corinthians 11:2–16). *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/2 (1993) pages 231–246.

**Susan Kennel Harrison** is a mother of two, living in Toronto, Ontario. She is a 1987 graduate of Goshen College, 1992 graduate of AMBS and currently working on a Th.D. in New Testament at Toronto School of Theology.

by Maribel Ramirez

## Teaching children in their language

I was born in Nuevo León, Mexico. I come from a rancho on the outskirts of town where there was little or no access to electricity, running water, and much less a church; although things have changed since then and we now have Catholic churches in strategically located ranchos. Since our trips into town were scarce—about once a month—we would hardly go to church. Trips into town were specifically reserved for purchasing food and other supplies. It was not until I was about five or six years old that I recall being in a church. By that time my family and I had migrated to California. I have memories of Dad taking us to the Catholic Church, but not knowing the schedule for mass, we sometimes went when the church was closed, so we would pray in the parking lot. I also have vivid memories of making a cross on my forehead with holy water as we entered church. After about a year of being in California, my father agreed to visit El Buen Pastor, Hermanos Menonita (The Good Shepherd, Mennonite Brethren) with my uncle (my grandfather's first cousin). It was at that Spanish-speaking Mennonite Brethren church where I began learning more about the Word of God.

Although the preaching and singing were done in Spanish, our Sunday school classes were taught in English. I remember my first Bible being an illustrated children's Bible in English. I thought nothing of it. We spoke Spanish at home and in church but English at school and in Sunday school and that made perfect sense to me. The books of the Bible and verses were all memorized in English, just like the alphabet and children's rhymes we were learning in school. It was not until my early years in high school that things began to change. In high school I became more aware of who I was as a Mexican. Before then I took it for granted since most everyone around me looked like me and talked like me. It soon began to bother me when others made malicious remarks about my race or when other Mexicans denied who they were and where they came from. Since others

• **Carol Penner** has completed her doctoral dissertation entitled "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence Against Women." She examined how suffering, obedience and forgiveness are developed in 20th century North American Mennonite sources such as theology books, church statements, hymn books, and writings by women. This is available through St. Michael's College at the Toronto School of Theology.

• **International Women's Day, March 8, 2000**, was chosen to launch the activities for the **Women's March 2000**. Women's groups from 157 countries and territories have been participating in the **World March of Women** against poverty and violence against women. On October 15, an international delegation will join the U.S. national march, which will pass by the offices of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. On October 17, thousands of women from participating countries will rally in the streets of New York for the grand finale of this march.

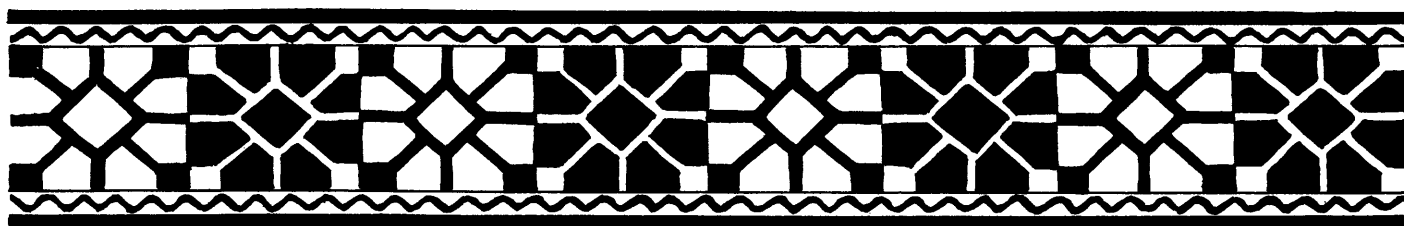
looked up to me, I thought to myself, what could I do to influence others to have a better attitude toward Mexicans? It was then that I actively sought to become more aware of the beauty of my Mexican heritage; I began to see it as a blessing from God. By seeing me embrace my cultural heritage and still excel academically, socially, etc., maybe others would not be ashamed of who they were. But, where would I start, what would I do?

I began by reading the Bible *King James Version* in Spanish. Every night I would get my father's Bible and read a chapter. From Genesis to Revelation, my eyes were opened to a brand new reality. The stories were exciting, and at times I would read beyond one chapter because I wanted to finish a specific story. The version was easy to read, but beyond that, my heart was touched and I felt something that I had never felt before in reading Scripture. I loved the Spanish language and thanked God for allowing me the privilege to feel what I felt when I read in my first language. As time passed, I experienced the same thing in song and in prayer. It was as if worship had taken on a brand new meaning for me.

I attended Fresno Pacific University (a Mennonite Brethren sponsored university) and though I felt the presence of God while singing in English, it did not compare to the closeness I felt to God when singing in Spanish. My soul was touched at a different level. It is difficult to explain, but it is an exhilarating, comforting feeling. I thank God because I can worship him in English and Spanish; the blessing is in being able to communicate with different people who worship God in their own personal language, with their own personal feeling. For me, reading scripture in Spanish allows me to feel a genuine closeness to my creator.

The version in which the Bible is translated is also important to me. I still prefer to read the Word of God in the *King James Version* (KJV). I find it easy to understand in Spanish, not as difficult as it is in English. It might also have something to do with the fact that in my church everyone has the *King James Version* in Spanish. I personally tend to resist modern translations, but I never hesitate referring someone to a more modern translation if they find the KJV a bit antiquated.

As I am now a Sunday school teacher, things have changed in my church. I teach the majority of my class in Spanish and the children read everything in Spanish. Since we could not get all the children the KJV, we use modern translations in Spanish, both for our convenience and their understanding. I am excited both when they progress in their understanding and in their reading. There are several reasons why I choose to teach the children in Spanish. One reason is because I want the children to be able to follow along during the worship service. The second reason is because I want to prepare them for when they go into the adult Sunday school class. As they grow, I want them to be able to communicate with the adults of the church, most of whom do not speak English. I also want them to feel like they will be able to contribute to the future growth of our church. The third reason is because I feel this period in their psychological development is very important, and reinforcing their Spanish language skills will only help develop a positive perception of their own culture. This in turn results in a stronger sense of self-worth. The fourth reason why I teach and have them read the Bible in Spanish is because I do not want them to forget who they are and who God made them to be as



WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns. Please do not reproduce without permission.

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Mexicans. Teaching children, especially Mexican children, to take pride in their ethnic heritage will help them appreciate their history and give them a clearer picture of the world. In a culture full of prejudice and racism, children need to understand that God made each one of us special in his eyes. The fifth reason is because of a study I read that said that children who know how to read and write in Spanish could learn to read and understand English faster because many of the words are derived from Latin, to which Spanish is similar. Because of these reasons, I feel that speaking, reading, and writing in Spanish will benefit the children's future.

I am not sure if my reasons for teaching in Spanish are justification enough for you, the reader, but they are for me. If we want unity and cohesion in our church, considering that it is a Spanish-speaking congregation, Spanish must be used with the children. That is my humble perspective as a member and a Sunday school teacher at El Buen Pastor, Hermanos Menonita.

**Maribel Ramirez is from Orange Cove, California. She graduated from the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary with a master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy on May 21, 2000.**

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